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Documents: JFK Probe Was Bogus

Garrison said to be reckless in pursuit of Shaw

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Secret documents just released by a federal agency strongly support the contention that the late Jim Garrison's investigation of the John F. Kennedy assassination was irresponsible and perhaps fraudulent.

The U.S. Assassination Records Review Board, responsible for screening all assassination documents and making public those that do not threaten national security, earlier this month released 15,000 pages of material turned over by Garrison's family. It also released 6,000 pages obtained from the family of the late New Orleans attorney Edward Wegmann, who helped successfully defend businessman Clay Shaw against Garrison's charges that he conspired to kill Kennedy.

Wegmann's released files depict Garrison — the hero of Oliver Stone's movie "JFK" — as a charlatan who picked a name almost at random as the target of his investigation. The substance of this attack is that Garrison simply concocted a case against Shaw without any factual basis, much less substantial evidence. Wegmann's files include a statement he took from William Gurvich, a former investigator for Garrison, before Shaw's 1969 trial.

Jim Garrison of New Orleans, left, investigated the assassination of President John Kennedy.

Garrison launched his investigation after hearing that New Orleans attorney Dean Andrews claimed a man identifying himself as Clay Bertrand telephoned him shortly after the assassination, said he lived in the local French Quarter and asked him to represent Lee Harvey Oswald. Andrews later repudiated the statement. Still, Gurvich said, Garrison insisted such a man existed and was "peculiar," meaning that he was homosexual. But nobody ever found Clay Bertrand.

Garrison would contend that Oswald and Shaw conspired to kill Kennedy.

Gurvich told Wegmann that Garrison first came up with the notion that Clay Shaw was Clay Bertrand on the basis of offhand speculative notes made by his chief assistant, Frank Klein (now dead).

"All they [Garrison and Klein] put in was like, 'Who does Frank Klein know by the name of Clay in New Orleans?' " Gurvich told Wegmann. "And the only one that came to Klein's mind was Shaw. 'Who lives in the French Quarter by the name of Clay?' And the only one he could think of was Shaw. And then the indication was that Clay Bertrand had peculiar tendencies and Klein thought: Well, who by the name of Clay has these sort of tendencies, who lives in the French Quarter? And that's what started Jim Garrison. That's what he calls circumstantial evidence. Klein didn't say it was Clay Shaw. He put Clay Shaw, question mark."

That speculation, Gurvich said, was the basis on which Garrison claimed Shaw had taken part in a plot to assassinate Kennedy. He described Garrison as proposing "irrational theories" on the assassination.

Although there was no evidence against Shaw, Gurvich said, Shaw was summoned one day to the district attorney's office. After Shaw was kept there for about four hours, he said, Garrison ordered: "Aw, ——, arrest him."

"Why?" Wegmann asked.

"Now you're asking a silly question," Gurvich replied. "He never says why." Gurvich testified in various proceedings in the Shaw case, but was not called upon to recount the incidents described in the Wegmann documents.

Many of the documents obtained from Garrison's family are investigators' reports that a man resembling Oswald was seen with a man resembling Shaw about four months before the assassination. The purported sightings were said to have occurred in Jackson and Clinton, La., northwest of New Orleans. One witness, a barber named Lea McGee, described giving a haircut to a man resembling Oswald. There was something suspicious that made him remember the man even four years later, when he was interviewed by investigator Andrew Sciambra.

"He did not need a haircut and could have gone without one," the barber said.

Michael Dorman, a free-lance writer, covered John F. Kennedy's assassination for Newsday. His books include "The Secret Service Story."